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# RipRap

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## Agencies reach landmark conservation water agreement

*by Joan Mier*

**T**he State of New Mexico and federal water managers have come to a precedent setting water conservation agreement intended to help protect the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow, according to Darrell Riekenberg, chief of the Office of Counsel. The Corps of Engineers, State of New Mexico, New Mexico Attorney General and the Department of Interior signed a three-year agreement to create a conservation pool and make water available for lease to the federal government to keep the river flowing sufficiently to preserve the minnow.

Terms of the agreement allow the Bureau of Reclamation to call for up to 30,000 acre-feet of water each year for a period of three years to promote the recovery and repopulation of the minnow. The State of New Mexico will make the conservation water that is stored in Jemez Canyon and Abiquiu Reservoirs available for this use.

"This is a bold initiative on the part of the state," said Dick Kreiner, chief of Reservoir Control Branch. The water would otherwise have flowed downstream to Elephant Butte Reservoir and contributed to New Mexico's compact deliveries. Fortunately, compact deliveries are in a credit status, meaning water has been over-delivered in previous years.

Part of the agreement also calls for the relocation of the San Marcial railroad bridge, Riekenberg said.

"The river bed has risen to just a few feet below the bridge, which has reduced the channel capacity," he said. The New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission will take the lead to cost-share with the Corps to support the relocation.

This year, the Bureau of Reclamation is expected to use about 25,000 of the 30,000 acre-feet available for this year. "We expect to have enough water for similar operations next year even without any spring runoff," Kreiner said.

The agreement is also intended to satisfy an

element of a Reasonable and Prudent Alternative (RPA) for the biological opinion issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding federal discretionary activities of the Corps and the Bureau of Reclamation related to water management operations. In addition to making more water available for the minnow, there are eight separate habitat improvement projects that are approximately 60 acres in size that are also required in the RPA, Kreiner said. Restoration will take place on at least one site per reach on the Rio Grande from the area of Velarde to the headwaters of Elephant Butte Reservoir. The reaches include Velarde, Espanola, Cochiti, Belen, Rio Puerco, Socorro and San Marcial.

"We are trying to get away from high volume water use because we know that is not sustainable," Kreiner said. "That's where the habitat restoration work comes in. It's more sustainable."

Three years is just a beginning in the effort, Kreiner said. The Endangered Species Act collaborative

*(Continued on page 3)*



**Fish and Wildlife Service workers rescue silvery minnows that have been isolated in this side channel after the Rio Grande had dried up.**